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ABSTRACT

An instructor teaching a summer semester of freshman composition collected data for a descriptive study from five students in the class. Of the five students, one was Caucasian, and the other four were Hispanic; all had children. A central value of the study was its potential for demonstrating the benefits of teaching composition through creative-writing-based techniques. The study argues that creative writing needs to be given a more central role in the curriculum of traditional composition courses. Because the instructor is a teacher of color who earned his degrees in institutions oriented to serve primarily mainstream students, he wanted to learn the effects that creative writing pedagogy has on non-mainstream students who are too often silenced by traditional composition curriculums. Additionally, the study can improve the general teaching of first-year composition by expanding the pedagogical repertoire available to composition teachers. This paper provides the general teaching plan for the course, discusses the assignments, and presents the results of the data collection. The paper also discusses the ways in which the instructor learned to cope with student silence. Noting that the instructor learned the specific manner in which he wanted to use creative writing pedagogy in future classes, the paper concludes with a section on his final observations. Contains 72 references. (NKA)

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# Finding New Voices: Notes from a Descriptive Study of Why and How I Learned to Use Creative-Writing Pedagogy to Empower My Composition Students—and Myself

By Donald Pardlow

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"Finding New Voices: Notes from a Descriptive Study of Why and How I Learned to Use Creative-Writing Pedagogy to Empower My Composition Students—and Myself"

by

Donald Pardlow, FLOYD COLLEGE

## Introduction

When I was an undergraduate English major, I discovered an ambition, like many other English majors, to be a writer. Because I was a student at a public institution, a climate that had been desegregated less than a generation ago, because I was too embarrassed by my lack of skill, and because of my reclusive nature, I decided to learn on my own.

I studied and wrote whenever I had free time or whenever classes were out of session, making infrequent steps of progress. The progress was not consistent, but I was lucky that the motivation was.

My ambition lasted with and influenced not only my development as an undergraduate but also my development as a graduate student, post-graduate student, and as a teacher of English. At each point of my education, my development for a career as an educator, I pursued my ambition fueled by a need to find a voice, my own voice, within the curriculums I studied, the curriculums I later taught, and in the cultures outside the classroom. Likewise, as a teacher, this ambition motivated me to want my students too to find their own voices.

Composition theory has recently begun to examine and validate my goal of fostering each student's self-expression, but the current and traditional approaches to teaching composition still mount considerable opposition.

Why I Wanted to Study Creative-Writing Pedagogy

In May, 1999, one of my fellow faculty members asked me for an article to publish in her newsletter In Touch. She told me that she wanted an upbeat perspective of the American Midwest from me, a recent emigrant to that area. However, because of space limitations in the newsletter, she wanted only a short passage. So I offered to write her this poem:

Flight to Flatland

As I climb the sky
west from Appalachia,
the hills and mountains
taper down and fall behind
me, away from the horizon.
Endless, mile-wide patches
of green, brown, and beige
now spread and stretch
before me and below me.

Occasionally I spot a thin,
asphalt ribbon stretching
itself across the patches,
and, every once in a while,
a shiny bug comes to life,
moves off one of the colors,
and crawls along the line.

For hours, and hours, the quilt spreads
itself out under me. Once in a while an amber
or a gold patch turns up, with a speck
of a barn or a frame house hugging close by.

After I touch down,



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I find myself too
rolling along such a strip,
covered up to the head
in the thick of the blanket,
until it too tapers down and opens
to my journey's end:

A set, or rather a circle,
of very long, very wide,
(yet single-storied) earth-tone
buildings cover, no,
crush down the edges
of a much wider grass plain.
And in the gulf amidst the blocks,
a thin gazebo holds fast.
(Pardlow, 1999, In Touch, p. 1)

The trip that I had taken was supposed to be the subject of the poem, but there really was another theme: As I wrote the poem, I slowly awoke to feelings which I had quashed for a long time. I wanted to attempt writing about a subject that stimulated and interested me—a controversial, risqué subject. But because I, like any new instructor, was too shy to take such a risk, I wrote this abstract, "safe" (and thus lackluster) poem, which I later regretted submitting for its lack of authentic development. And worse, when the poem was printed, the editor ignored many of my original line-breaks, cramming many of the lines in huge blocks of prose that in no way represented my speech rhythms and voice. I got "poetic justice" for selling myself out.

However, seeing one of my works in print, despite the fact that it disappointed me, gave me the urge to try publishing again. That summer I pulled out a half-dozen of my better drafts, re-edited each of them a few dozen times, and sent them to some small, esoteric



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literary journals. To my surprise, most of them were not only accepted, but many of the editors told me that they liked my writing style. So from that time until today, I have continued to squeeze my creative-writing time between the heavy demands of teaching several sections of composition, administering a college-writing program, and pursuing my doctoral degree in a composition program. As I have felt since long ago, I think that my need to express my true self in writing will forever serve as a stepchild to the need to earn a living:

Tear Off Your Masks
(for Paul)

"Tear off your masks--they bind and they choke,
they smother the spirits of our wise, strong folk.
You elders say I talk brash, of childish sin:
The hell with them! Let's stand and be men!
'We wear the mask', a weak, worn-out quote
which sly, crafty knaves still voice from rote:
today, as then, truth still breaks in their throats.
Hear it betray their every laugh and every grin?
Tear off your masks!"

"Wise fool, you must play true within this hoax,
so dance light and graceful while under this yoke,
Our audience will always watch with the mien
of a frown—and it laughs *never* as a friend.

Give up your dreams, you should have awoke.
*Never* tear off your mask."
(Pardlow, 2000, p. 18)

When I was an undergraduate, I had always wanted to learn creative writing, but because I was a black English major in a "traditional" literary studies English program, in a mainstream (white) university, I never felt comfortable enough to enter the creative-writing program at my college. In 1988, that program was attended

by mostly affluent, well-educated, and white honor students, the intellectual elite of the student body. Furthermore, the English department, like many others in that day (and even today) did not encourage its literature students to write creatively: the department was dead-set on training students to become teachers of English literature, teachers who taught literature in the way the department wanted literature to be taught, from strictly a historical viewpoint.

Therefore, I independently took up the task of learning to write and to understand poetry: I felt much **safer** teaching myself. I started to keep journals of all the poetic ideas that sprang to my mind, and from time to time, I would go back to a passage and revise it, not necessarily according to any traditions and rules, but until I felt comfortable with it:

A poet's task

pounce upon the point
of an upright pin; balance
quick—before blood breaks
(Pardlow, 1999, Lucidity, p. 70)

Yet I remained afraid to try publishing or reading publicly for another ten years, until my friend invited my submission to her newsletter. The fear was based not only on the social climate of the university: I always had and have been reclusive, so the thought of reading publicly just made me ill. I used to worry about my fear, but I stopped worrying when I learned that even a poet as great as Edwin Arlington Robinson also avoided public readings for the same reason.


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Yet fate tendered me a pleasant surprise when, preparing for my doctoral examinations, I noted a recent trend among some scholars, scholars such as Wendy Bishop (1990, 2000), Bishop and Hans Ostrom (1994), Patrick Bizzarro (1993), and James Britton (1993), a trend advocating the teaching of both creative writing and composition in the same classroom. When I had found this pedagogical approach that fit so readily in line with my writing ambitions, I decided to incorporate creative-writing assignments with my regular composition curriculum. These new creative-writing assignments turned out to be well-received by my students. I picked a range of assignments, assignments which covered a culturally-diverse variety of discourse modes to also enhance the multicultural dimensions of my composition course.

My examination studies also influenced my development as a teacher in a second manner. I had learned from David Schaafsma (1993) the value that the art of storytelling has in the language development of all people, and I had been convinced that storytelling is one of the major ways that we construct and perceive the world, its inhabitants, and ourselves. At the Midwest community college where I had taught for two years, I had observed that the assignments which the college prescribed for its required first-year composition course all included an element of narrative discourse: the first two assignments of the course, the remembered-event and remembered-person "essays," were obviously types of stories; the next assignment, the profile, was a narrative based on journalistic research; in the final two

course assignments, the argument and the research paper, storytelling could be used as an effective means of argumentation and of exposition. Therefore, along with the creative-writing, I began incorporating storytelling exercises into my composition curriculum (Pardlow, May and March 2002, March 2001). The students again participated in the assignments with little protest, particularly, I think, because each assignment contained that common thread of narrative, a thread which made the curriculum easy to follow because the students liked being empowered to tell their own stories (Pardlow, May 2002).

Unfortunately, my "bold," new composition curriculum of creative writing and storytelling did not lack critics. Some of my colleagues, more experienced teachers who professed a wide knowledge of teaching methodologies (but made little reference to language-learning theory), asked me, "Why teach poetry and storytelling in your composition class? What is the value of it? Haven't most students learned narrative in high school? Will it help them gain practical skills for the workplace? Will it improve the grammar and punctuation of their papers?" They held what Gian Pagnucci and Dawn Abt-Perkins (1992) identify as the misconceptions that "narrative is of lesser value than expository forms" (p. 55) and that narrative is a "stepping stone to some higher plane of communication" (p. 57, 58).

The questions which my colleagues raised reflect also what Stephen North (1987) calls the mindset of teachers still advocating the widely-held bias towards compartment-oriented, step-by-step, product-oriented writing instruction. Nevertheless, although this current-traditional approach is still widely practiced, I believe, like Ollie Oviedo (2001), that it is flawed because it implies that the teaching of composition by using poetry does not train the student-writer to develop a thesis and supporting details when he or she writes an analytical essay on some topic, say, like the canonization of John Donne. In fact, Donald Murray claims that the processes for writing analytically and writing creatively are not only highly similar but also, in many cases, identical: although the end-products may look different, they all can emanate from the same self, the self of an author who choose to reveal herself or himself by the rhetorical choices she or he makes in writing (Murray, 2002).

Nevertheless, my colleagues' questions also made me realize that my method of instruction, like any method, has its advantages and disadvantages in relation to the (sometimes medieval) methods of my colleagues, methods with which I was out of synch: Teaching does not occur in a vacuum, so I eventually realized that my practices could incur political liabilities amongst my colleagues (Swan, 2000). Thus I became interested in learning more specifically which discourse contexts were most suitable for prescriptive and non-prescriptive teaching methods.

There was another reason that I was so interested in finding a better method for teaching composition. Because I have received all of my higher education in publicly-funded (white) colleges, I have attended countless classes in which I was the only black or minority present in the classroom. Like Karen McCullough (1997) I have frequently, during many class discussions and small-group discussions, felt too afraid to express my personal views on some subjects because I had learned often that if I did contribute to a discussion, my remarks were ignored--or sometimes derided. So because of my experiences, and because writing courses require a great deal of open discussion, which empowers each student in his or her development of voice and writing skill, I was worried increasingly about the issue of student silence in the classroom and about how creative-writing pedagogy might address this problem in the composition class. My personal story, my poetry writing, and my developing review of contemporary scholarship have thus led me to address the following questions in my subsequent research:

(1) What are the results, as manifested in student writing and reflections, of a composition teacher using creative-writing pedagogy in a composition classroom?

(2) What is the impact--political, social, and/or cultural--of creative-writing pedagogy on the teacher who uses that pedagogy in a composition classroom?

(3) How is student silence impacted by using creative-writing pedagogy in a composition classroom?

I came to the conclusion that many composition students, particularly students from non-traditional backgrounds like myself, feel a need to express themselves in their writing, but their need is often frustrated or blocked by the current composition curriculum, which focuses mostly on teaching expository writing. I believe that until these students are allowed to fulfill this need, they will not make significant progress as either creative or academic writers.

## Research Methodology

### Research Site

The site for this qualitative research was a classroom of Western University (pseudonym), an undergraduate and graduate degree-granting institution in the southwestern United States. The research took place on the main campus of the college, where in the Summer Semester of 2001 I taught a section of freshman composition in the language-arts building which houses Western's College of Arts and Sciences. The layout of the classroom was a conventional grid of movable desks. An adjacent computer lab was also used for the course.

The course that I taught was a section of English Composition (ENG 102), the first-year composition course of Western. In this course I collected the primary data for the study. ENG 102 is taught regularly during the fall, winter, and summer semesters by instructors and professors who hold at least a master's degree in English or English education.

### Study Participants

The students were mostly first-year and second-year Western students. They were non-traditional students. Most of the students had children. The projected enrollment for the section of ENG 102 was twenty-four students; however, only eleven students enrolled, and five of the nine who completed the course chose to participate in the study. The ethnic background of most of the students on the Western campus

is Caucasian, and about 25% of the student body is Hispanic, which gives Western the federal status and supplemental federal funding of a Hispanic-educating institution. Three percent of the student body is American Indian, and another three percent is Black American.

However, the enrollment of the class did not accurately reflect the demographics of the college: five of the students were Caucasian, and the remaining six were Hispanic. Two of the Caucasian students withdrew in the first week of class, leaving three Caucasian students and six Hispanic students to complete the class. Of the five students who chose to become participants in this survey, one was Caucasian and the remaining four were Hispanic. All of the five participants, as well as two of the four students who did not choose to participate, had children: this fact that most of the students were parents makes the survey important in spite of its small group.

Value of the Study

A central value of this study is its potential for demonstrating the benefits of teaching composition through creative-writing based techniques. This is important because there is currently a bias in academia against creative writing despite the fact that creative writing courses are very popular on many college campuses (Ostrom, 1994). Ostrom argues that creative writing has been devalued by the business-based model of education that came into favor at the beginning of the 20th century, a model which placed and continues to

place primary education emphasis on preparing students for the workplace in which they will compete for a living.

It can be argued that one effect of this business model is the increased focus in composition courses on "practical assignments," research papers, and service learning, and a de-emphasis on more creative language pursuits like poetry writing (Pagnucci & Abt-Perkins, 1992). My study hopes to show evidence that creative writing exercises do serve to foster students' practical writing development while also fostering their creative growth. Thus my study argues that creative writing needs to be given a more central role in the curriculum of traditional composition courses. And on a practical level, in addition to highlighting the value of creative writing pedagogy, I believe that this study has helped me to learn how creative writing exercises directly effect students' learning and how to administer such exercises better.

One other value to my study is this: Because I am a teacher of color and because I had earned my degrees in institutions oriented to serve primarily students in the cultural mainstream, I wanted to learn how creative writing pedagogy effects non-mainstream students who are too often silenced by traditional composition curriculums. I hope that this study provides insight into how a creative-writing pedagogy can empower a writing class of culturally-diverse students. I also hope that these pedagogical techniques will encourage more creative risk-taking by students in their writings and that these techniques will

enhance the multicultural learning opportunities for students in freshman-composition courses.

Finally, I believe that this study can improve the general teaching of first-year composition by expanding the pedagogical repertoire available to composition teachers. Whatever success my study reveals about the use of creative-writing pedagogy in the composition classroom, I hope that the study will encourage other composition teachers to try these techniques and will also lend research support to those already making use of this currently marginalized approach.

Limitations of the Study and Biases

This teacher research study examines one section of composition taught during only one semester, so I have no other composition classes with which to compare the study group. Only a single instructor carried out the study, so I could not compare my teaching to the teaching of any other composition instructor on the campus. Because teacher research studies are closely tied to the social context studied, the findings from this study may be applicable only to my own teaching context, that of a small, public, Hispanic-educating university in the rural southwest United States. While these are limitations, nevertheless my single section of composition was the typical section that Western usually offered in the summer semester to its students. Therefore, all of the Western students who registered for ENG 102 that semester registered for my section and no other.

Because the major ethnic groups at my university are Caucasian and Hispanic, the findings of this study also may not be applicable to the language-learning practices of other ethnic groups in other regions. Also, because I am Black, the nature of my study and my student responses may differ from those that a teacher of another racial background might evoke. However, as a Black researcher I can uniquely offer my perspective, a perspective which I feel differs form that of a teacher from a mainstream background. Most of the students exhibited a comfort and an immediate familiarity with me that I had not seen in the students taught by other instructors, probably in part because of the widely-held misconception that young black instructors are supposed to be "hipper" or "cooler" than other instructors. Therefore, my students have always been very open with me in informal settings, even my classroom, which my students tell me they feel relieved to be in. Besides, my blackness is an incontrovertible fact that affects me, affects everything I do, and affects all people with whom I interact.

My study was conducted during the summer semester, which was only half the length of a regular fall or spring semester. Still, a full course unit represents a significant component of each student's time and grade. And because the semester was shorter than usual, most of the students were very motivated to complete freshman English, a crucial requirement of their educations, in a shorter and less-frustrating time.

My teaching style favors whole-language, workshop-based, collaborative learning; therefore, I avoided proscriptive means of instruction as much as possible, except when individual students asked for this specific type of instruction. I intended to meet this demand with individualized direct instruction. My avoidance of prescriptive teaching methods also infers that I risked failing to gain clear-cut results from my methods (Macauley, 1999). This risk of failure further infers that my research, done in a workshop environment, might have made the participants feel compelled to produce writings at a pace too frantic for substantial learning, a concern Macauley also mentions. Despite these limitations, I used the workshop-based approach because it provided the relaxed, stress-free, almost laid-back environment that I felt was a **necessary** means of spurring creativity amongst the students.

My General Teaching Plan

My general lesson plan had been formed, like most of my syllabus, during initial trials with creative-writing pedagogy from 1998 to 2001. By the time I initiated this teacher-research study, I had formed a general plan for teaching creative-writing in a composition course. The lesson-plan for each week of class was what Rena Palloff and Keith Pratt call a topic-driven plan, a plan not bound by measured time-slots (1999). The topic-driven plan included at least three of the following types of activities for each class: the activities in general were written reactions to assigned readings, in-class writing-process

activities (related to the major course writings), in-class creative-writing assignments, small-group discussions of the written results, large-group discussions of the results, small-group peer reviews, short lectures, even shorter grammar (usage) exercises, and open-writing periods to complete overdue work.

I would attempt to schedule at least three activities for each class, but I would place them on a flexible schedule in order to accommodate any unexpected delays, delays such as a lengthy class-discussion, a barrage of student questions, or a barrage of student complaints. The delay that most often occurred was that the students required or asked for additional writing time. At any rate, the class and I would complete each assignment at a pace that was necessary for the class as a whole to complete the work, a pace which was rarely a pre-planned pace. Therefore, many of my plans had to be revised each day because I often carried an uncompleted assignment over to the next day. Although the time spent on each assignment varied, the lectures and discussions lasted generally about ten to fifteen minutes, periods of time which were far shorter than the time spent writing in the class.

I used a research journal to record the observations which I made in my classes. Each student in my classes was also required to keep a journal of freewritings, pre-writing assignments, reactions to readings, reactions to discussions, rough drafts, major written assignments, and reflections on the learning process. Each entry in

each student's journal was graded and annotated by me on a simple scale: a check mark accompanied by three pluses ("+++") stood for "excellent" on the scale, a check mark accompanied by two pluses ("++") stood for "good," the check mark accompanied by one plus ("+") stood for "average," and the check mark unaccompanied stood for "fair" or "just passing." The journals were also graded overall by the number of assignments completed, by the depth of the writing attempted, and by the originality of the writings.

Creative-writing exercises were given to the students on a regular basis. The exercises covered narrative and a variety of verse forms:

- The outlining of two short stories (one story based on a true event and one based on a true person)
- A collaborative story
- A chant (an ancient repetitive form)
- A black-American poem (blues lyric or rap)
- A ballad
- A haiku, senryu, tanka, and renge
- A sonnet
- An epigram
- A collaborative poem
- A free-verse poem
- A limerick
- A cinquain

I graded each assignment mostly on a participatory basis, i.e., how much effort did the writer expend on the assignment and how much risk did he or she incur. Besides the written document itself, I graded each assignment by whatever questions and remarks its author had made while writing it. I used the same scale that I had created for the journal assignments.

Major writing assignments based on the narrative mode were given to the students. The specific assignments that I used were the following ones:

- Remembered-event story
- Remembered-person story
- Journalistic story or profile
- Argumentative essay
- Research project

Portfolios of revised and representative works were composed by the students at the end of the semester. Like the journals, the portfolios charted the emerging design of the study and added to the thick description for the study.

More Specific Matters

As I mentioned in the previous chapter, I planned to teach each class along the guidelines of a topic-driven lesson plan, a plan which would schedule at least three activities for each class. I would place them on a flexible schedule in order to accommodate any unexpected and inevitable delays.

I usually began each class by discussing what we had done in the previous class, and then we began the first assignment. If I had assigned a reading for homework (the readings were related to the major writing assignments), I usually wrote on the board a question or prompt related to the reading and asked the class to freewrite for at least ten minutes on the subject. All of the students usually were still writing until the end of the ten-minute period, so I often gave them extra time, especially the female students who asked often for extra time. We often began the discussion of those writings usually after twenty-five to thirty minutes of reflective-writing.

The discussions were usually short, not longer than ten or fifteen minutes. At the end of the discussion, I would emphasize some points of the reading which I felt were essential to helping the students complete the major paper that was related to the readings. If the topic was very important, I asked the class to write reflectively again to consolidate what had been learned from the prior freewriting and discussion.

I wanted to take the maximum amount of precautions to make sure that my study did not interfere with the students' learning of the normal course requirements, so in each class, only after the students and I had discussed the major assignment, the assignment related to the course requirements, did I introduce a creative-writing assignment. I would give the students a handout explaining a specific genre of poetry and ask them to read it for a few minutes. Then I

would explain the genre to the class in a very short lecture. Next, I would ask a student to read some examples of the genre to the class, and we would interpret each example in a discussion. Finally, I would ask the class to draft a poem of the genre to share by the end of class or in the next day's class, and I would outline the requirements of the genre more specifically to the class.

The specific requirements for the poetry assignment allowed the students some latitude. I allowed each student to choose his or her subject matter, and if the genre imposed a metrical requirement upon the students, I used a method that I later found out creative-writing teachers like David Baker and Ann Townsend (2000) use often with beginning students: I prescribed the syllabics (a number-range of syllables) for the lines and stanzas of verse. The students were able to write lines and stanzas within the ranges easily; again like Baker and Townsend I did not specify the number of accents for the lines and stanzas because most of my students were inexperienced verse writers. Because the students had a comfortable range of syllables to write each line within, they were able to concentrate effectively on the pragmatics (thematic and discourse situation) of the genres and write meaningful drafts.

For example, I asked each student to draft, among other types of poems, a ballad. I asked each student to draft a poem of at least three stanzas narrating any event that he or she chose. Each stanza was prescribed to have four lines that fit these syllabic requirements:

the first line and the third line had to have between six to eight syllables, and the second line and the fourth line had to have between four to six syllables. I also asked the students to rhyme the final sounds at the ends of the second and fourth lines (and the ends of the first and third lines if the writer wished to do so).

In a similar manner, I set syllabic requirements to approximate the meter, the rhythm, and the beat of a sonnet written in iambic pentameter (lines between eight to eleven syllables), in addition to asking the class to meet the thematic traditions (e.g., the octave, sestet, and volta) of the genre. Aside from the thematic requirements, syllabic ranges were set for all of the other poetic genres except for the chant and free verse assignments. The three lines of the haiku were prescribed at, respectively, five syllables or less for the first line, seven syllables or less for the second line, and five syllables or less for the third line. The ranges for the five lines of the limerick were set at seven to nine syllables for the first, second, and fifth lines, and at four to seven syllables for the third and fourth lines. And the ranges of the five lines of the cinquain were set at two, four, six, eight, and two syllables.

The chant poem and the free-verse poem lacked precise syllabic requirements, but I asked each student to try to keep a beat in his or her lines, and I asked each student also to try to craft a coherent narrative in his or her drafts. Although the chant and free-verse genres do not necessarily have a strong beat nor a narrative structure,

I asked my students to write the genres in this way to help the students make a strong link between their creative writing and their academic writing. I also reiterated, time and time again, during the peer-review sessions that when each student read a draft aloud to his or her classmates, that he or she should follow the advice of Robert Hillyer (1960) and take the time to read in as low-pitched, relaxed, and slow a voice as possible in order to find the beat of his or her language most easily. I asked my students to read this way whether they were reading prose or poetry, for I told them constantly that a writer, by finding the beat of his or her own language, could find also his or her authentic voice easily.

After each student read his or her poem to a small group or the entire class, the audience would discuss the work in the traditional workshop manner. To avoid dominating the discussion and silencing the students, I would refrain from participating unless the discussion lulled or took a negative turn. I always appraised each effort on its strong points, and then I asked the writer open-ended questions about the work to keep the discussion better student-centered and the students better engaged.

I collected finished drafts of poems whenever a major course paper was turned in. I asked the students to turn in their journal assignments along with the major papers (final drafts and rough drafts) so that I could assess the growing journal as the semester progressed. I graded each turned-in creative-writing assignment by

the scale that I used for the journal assignments: I tried to, above all, base my assessment of each assignment by what I judged to be the degrees of risk-taking and of effort that the student undertook. I based my decisions on risk-taking and effort because I looked at most of the completed exercises as drafts-in-progress, not as completed works of art. I made my students aware of my viewpoint because they often had to draft works in a short period of time (two or three days), and because I did not want the students to feel pressured unfairly, under such limited time constraints, to produce polished works. Bizzaro (1993) rightly knows that pressure deteriorates writing performance. I myself do not try to publish any poem before I have worked on it for a year.

## Results of the Data Collection

### Writing Performance on Pre-Writing Activities, Journals, Narratives and Poetic Writings

Within the student results a new paradigm emerged--*gender-differences* in performance. Both the female and male writers tended to write most easily about subjects related to their personal lives, their family lives, or their opinions. Whenever the students wrote about personal concerns, writings were better developed, better organized, and of course more poignant than writings on more abstract matters. I encountered fewer instances of writing blocks and fewer questions about the writing processes when the students wrote about personal matters.

Moreover, the female writers, as a whole, tended to over-perform on the assignments, producing more pages and more writings than I had expected in a wider variety of genres than I had expected. The male writers wrote less, but they wrote with a greater use of humor and with greater dexterity in their use of metrical forms; therefore, they seemed to be more conscious of an audience in their writings.

### Writing Performance on Expository, Argumentative, and Research Writings

The writers' overall performance in the course, which had impressed me in the first six weeks of the semester, began to fail to meet my expectations when they produced the penultimate and final drafts of the argumentative essays, which were the first traditionally-academic papers I had required for the class. The previous papers, stories based on, respectively, a past experience, an acquaintance, and an interview (or

observation), were better-developed than the arguments. The poetic drafts were also much more eloquent (in terms of creative-language use) and well-developed than the arguments.

I began to see the writers experience some discomfort as they brainstormed their essays in peer groups which were larger than usual, which made me suspect that many of the students were not feeling very confident about their brainstorming. The outlines that the students collectively brainstormed turned out well, but the drafts that the writers individually produced often lacked coherence. Initially, I did not feel alarmed because I myself often revise my outlines and theses as I draft and revise my writings. However, the student-writers did not make any improvements on the subsequent drafts. This performance persisted also in the subsequent academic assignments.

The main discrepancy that I noted in the argumentative writings was between the prewriting assignments, which I designed and coached the students through, and the subsequent and final drafts. The outlines and lists which each student wrote were detailed and systematically developed, but the first drafts of the essays lacked adequate development and organization. And after the first drafts were shared with the class, the students failed to revise the drafts sufficiently: the students only edited minor errors in usage in mechanics, letting the major thematic and content-related problems just lie. Many of the papers made the error of focusing on an anecdote related to the subject and, abandoning the persuasive mode, developing that anecdote as a narrative instead of arguing—the papers never returned to an

argumentative mode. Other papers were written as if the writer had completely ignored the outline that he or she had drafted before writing the first draft.

Changes in Pedagogy (Cultivation and Modeling)

The male contingent seemed preoccupied with a "get things done" mentality, a pragmatic type of attitude centered on accomplishing tasks, whether they were done very well or not. The female student contingent, which by the records did all of the emotional risk-taking, seemed driven by a need to explore their selves and their histories, hoping to discover some new self-concept, some new self-appreciation from their writing efforts. Therefore, my pedagogy for the groups usually took one of two basic tendencies: the writers who tended to take risks were taught with a pedagogy based on what Dennis Fox (1983) calls a growing type of theory, one which accommodated each student's idiosyncracies to facilitate the development of that student's writing process; the writers who tended to avoid risks were taught by a pedagogy based on what Fox calls a shaping theory, one which gave each student several examples (text-writings, former-student writings, teacher-writings, and peer-writings), i.e., a pattern or scaffolding to emulate (1983). The approach that I took with each individual student was determined mostly by the specific context of several informal conversations (informal interviews and informal conferences) that I had with her or him during the prewriting, drafting, revising, and editing of each assignment.

Review of the Student Journals

Again there is a marked difference between the journals of the male writers and the journals of the female writers. At the beginning of the semester, each student wrote comments about his of her writing style, comments which usually matched the tone for the way they would write in the first week of the semester. The male writers tended to stress as writing-strengths their abilities to learn, their qualities of thought, and their past experiences; the male writers tended to list as weaknesses their usage and editing skills. The female writers tended not to list any strengths (except for one female writer who listed her confidence), but most of them claimed non-standard usage as a weakness that they would like to learn to overcome. Most of the female writers said that they had problems with their confidence as writers. One female writer explicitly expressed this regarding creative writing.

*(1) Gender Differences with Journal Writing*

The students tended to differ by gender in their choices of prewriting activities. The male students started pre-writing most of their drafts by outlining them; therefore, their prewritings tended to be terse, to-the-point, and developed with an economy of effort, probably because they both attended classes full-time, worked full-time jobs, and supported wives and families. They approached the writing tasks impartially, as a job to be completed. Their journals were not as long and developed as those of the female members of the class.

The female students tended to prefer the more open-ended methods of prewriting. The journals of Naomi (pseudonyms are used for all

participant names), a young Hispanic parent, and Tessa, a Caucasian parent and non-traditional student, show a heavy reliance upon free-writing and fast-writing as prewriting methods. The journals of these female students show more examples of clustering than the journals of the male students, which are confined mostly to outlining and to some list-making (brainstorming). The females' journals also experimented often with diverse fonts in these pre-writings, showing a much more varied range of responses than the males' journals did.

*(2) Drawing in Journals*

Tessa's journal also exemplified another pre-writing strategy, drawing or doodling. She often drew figures in the margins of the drafts of her poems; subsequently, by the time she had polished her drafts into a final draft, she would replace the original drawing with a similar illustration chosen from the ClipArt file of Microsoft Word. She even made efforts to arrange these graphics aesthetically.

Tessa most often drew illustrations of horses; I could obviously tell that she could draw horses well. She had learned to train horses and to care for abused horses from her mother, whom she chose to write a story about. Tessa also wrote a journalistic profile on another topic related to horses, a rodeo. She and her husband took care of nine horses on their family farm, so surely the drawings were related to Tessa's real-life concerns. The numerous drawings and doodle of horses, along with the doodles and the Clip Art that Tessa included on her poetics drafts, are evidence that she is a visually-oriented learner.

Tessa was the only student who drew in her journal, and she produced by far the most prolific writings of the students. Janet Olson (1992) claims that the visually-oriented, or visual learner, is often misunderstood or not appreciated by many language-arts teachers, who have difficulties in teaching such a learner to write effectively. I am glad that I did encourage Tessa to write more poetry, which she readily did: Olson (1992) asserts that the poetic genre is the most highly amenable one to visually-oriented learners. However, Tessa failed to draw during the prewriting and drafting of her argumentative and research papers, which I believe was one of the key reasons that her performance declined on those papers.

*(3) Range and Content in Journals*

The journals of the female writers also exemplified a wider range of rhetorical and poetic tropes and genres than the journals of the male writers. The female writers made heavier use of the chant genre, and of course they relied upon the tropes of anaphora, alliteration, and assonance far more than the male writers. The male writers tended to write more in the fixed metrical forms, making more consistent uses of rhyme. The poetic from used most by the male writers was the ballad stanza.

The content of the female poems and journal writings often covered moments of intense personal crisis or triumph, moments such as the loss of a loved one or the birth of a child. The males often wrote about exhibitions of manly prowess such as fights, contests, or adventures. I believe a subconscious desire to show-off or to "shoot-the-breeze" usually motivated

the males because they heavily used humor in their writings from the beginning of the semester until the end. However, as Barron (2002, 2001) has stated, since eight of the nine students were parents, most of the students often wrote also about their families, and all of the students chose to write at least once about a personal friend.

*(4) Journal Responses to Sharing*

The journals also show gender-differences in student attitudes towards the peer-review sessions. Naomi admitted that at the beginning of the semester she felt too embarrassed to share her writings in peer-reviews; likewise Carmen, a young Hispanic parent, and Tessa both wrote that they did not like reading their writing aloud to a small group in the peer-review sessions. Naomi and Carmen later began to appreciate the peer-review sessions for the feedback they received on their peer-edited papers.

However, Tessa never really embraced reading her drafts aloud during the peer-review sessions because she stuttered: I would never have guessed that she had stuttered because I never detected a stutter in her speech during the class, the conferences, and the interview I had with her. Apparently Tessa has learned to compensate for it well. Tessa did confess later that she began to enjoy sharing her writings with the class, but she said she still found initiating the process difficult; she shared mostly with female peer-groups.

The male students admitted no discomfort in sharing their writings in the peer-review sessions. In fact, probably because the males often read aloud in all-male peer-groups, some of them wrote that they enjoyed

sharing their writings. They enjoyed listening to how each of their peers could turn phrases and develop a poem or story, and they also liked hearing a peer express his feelings, but each male did not want himself to be the peer revealing himself.

*(5) Journal-Critiques of Peer-Writings and Assigned Readings*

The critiques that the female students wrote about each peer's writings tended to be more appreciative, even more generous, than the critiques that the male students wrote. As popular stereotypes would suggest, the male students tended to write shorter and blunter critiques of their classmates' work: I'm sure some of the comments were written in good humor, or as a catharsis of the boredom built up from listening to an uninteresting writing, but the male journal-responses to some of the sample stories written by former students was also sometimes just downright brutal: e.g., one response to a Thanksgiving story was "What Thanksgiving means to me....Who cares what it means to you"; another response to a mother-daughter relationship story was "...sucked. Enough said." The responses reflect what Ruth Ray (2000) identifies as a stereotypical male disdain for relationship-oriented stories: most of the male students frequently expressed a fondness only for action stories.

Virtually all of the students wrote that they liked the creative-writing exercises, but Naomi was one student who took the time to notice the value of the exercises:

> I really enjoy writing poems because it involves a lot of *creative thinking* [italics added], and I am actually starting to love that because it gets me away for a while. I can't believe writing...actually gets me relaxed and it eases my mind. I guess

> that's a sign that I now enjoy it and I feel more confident about it.

Naomi's comment and journal strikes me as examples of the three goals which Libby Falk Jones (1990) states are shared by both composition pedagogy and feminist pedagogy. First, Naomi validates herself by recognizing her feelings and her experiences, even those of her ancestors; she recognizes herself as a worthy perspective from which to view the world (Jones, 1990). Second, Naomi has created writings in a variety of genres over a variety of subjects, a task which has fostered innovation, the ability to go beyond the expected results and to produce something truly original. Finally, Naomi's fulfillment of the former two goals has laid the ground work for the third goal, critical thinking, which is exemplified by the first sentence of the quotation above.

Individual Conferences, Questionnaires, and Interviews

The two scheduled teacher-student writing conferences which I had with each student revealed little more expressed information beyond that which the drafts, papers, and journals gave me. Whenever I talked to the students in a formal setting, they gave me short, clipped, almost mechanical answers to the questions that I asked. Their constantly averted eyes, flattened tones of voice, and stock answers—some of the students even repeated answers that may have been previously overheard—prompted me to try to relax them and to open them up with small talk (asking open-ended questions), talk usually about their other classes, their majors, the summer heat, or the family members who were waiting outside the classroom.

Each student responded favorably to my informal prompts, but when the conversation drifted back to the writing class, I still got replies that sounded like they were scripted, or like the students were trying to tell me what they thought I wanted to hear: Most of the students gave me short, pat answers like "I like the creative-writing assignments," "The pace of the class is really good," or "I don't have a problem with reading aloud [to the class]." Anytime I asked them to give me more detailed answers, the students were reluctant to explain further--unless I *lead* them with further questions. However, some of the males did complain vaguely about the females' lack of participation whenever the class as a whole shared writings; some of the females explained that they felt safer sharing in smaller groups.

Since it appeared that I was not going to get any more relevant information from the conferences, I foresaw the same problem arising in the formal interviews because Chris Green (2001) too learned that scheduled interviews can sometimes work against the free-form nature of a writing workshop. To compensate, I put more questions in the questionnaires to make up for the scheduled conferences; I also added an additional questionnaire to the study. I found that as the students' drafts, papers, and journals suggested to me, students were much more willing to reveal information to me by writing than by talking face-to-face. This was an important methodological research discovery for me, and it helped me ensure that I did gather good data.

Genres

Every student tends to have a favorite and a non-favorite genres. The students with analytical bents said they tended to prefer the expository and argumentative essay-assignments over the more creative ones. The female students with analytical mindsets admitted their difficulties with some of the poetry assignments (like the limerick and rap poem) and came to me immediately for assistance with their problems. If they still felt unsure of how to proceed, they also sought assistance from their spouses or children. This set of data again seems to indicate that the female writers were more comfortable with freer metrical forms of poetry.

However, when the male students came to me for help, they did not voice helplessness or uncertainty; they expressed their dislike of particular assignments, sometimes very vocally, and wished to perform the task according to their aesthetic preferences, not according to my instructions. Sensing that many of the male students had a preference for rap verses and other structured lyrics, I usually acquiesced.

All of the writers lauded the class for giving them the privilege of choosing their writing subjects; however, writers of both sexes requested more grammar exercises. Some of the male students, who had abstained from class participation at the beginning of the semester, later complained, ironically, about a lack of class participation from the female students. I think that this was an appeal for the women's attention.

Conclusion

Although the expository prose of the papers, the journals, and the portfolios often was bland, the creative assignments gave me a vivid picture into each participant's rhetorical style, work habits, and values. I got the most evidence for the poetic assignments because of the genre's economic use of language packed with meaning both emotionally and logically: because each poetic assignment requested that each student draft a short poem, the students were able to consider seriously and to write thoroughly about a wide variety of subjects in a short period of time.

Some general purposes emerged from the participants' writings. The majority of the participants wrote about concerns related to their immediate families (domestic concerns), love relationships, or past setbacks. Each female writer said she wrote mostly to achieve ends of self-learning and self-assessment and was therefore prone to keeping her writings private, open to the scrutiny of only herself and the instructor. However, each male writer wrote mostly to compete for the respect of his classmates and was predisposed to share his writings with the class.

The quality of the expressive writings, the students' and the participants' genres of choice, towered over the quality of their expository and argumentative (academic) writings: the participants seemed more familiar with poetic and narrative genres. Moreover, because the written expressive genres were the medium of choice for the participants, the quality of those writings surpassed the quality of the oral discourses in the classroom, a revelation indicated by comparing the results of the scheduled

interviews and conferences with the results of the participants' written documents.

## How I Learned to Cope with Student Silence

### Introduction

What a teacher should do when she or he encounters student silence had been a mystery to me for a long time. Personally I have always felt that a silent student had ***something*** on his or her mind, even if I had no means of knowing what it was, or even if I gave allowance to the possibility that such a student might have been bored, tired, or just lazy.

I have always taught in a laid-back manner, so I rarely, if ever, lost my cool over instances of student silence. Generally I would ignore the student's silence publicly, and find a way of working around it with the student privately. I would not feel uncomfortable with the student unless his or her silence was egregious, lasting for several weeks and manifesting in uncompleted course-work, or unless I were subjected to an alien influence, i.e., an attending administrator who expected an active performance from both myself and the class. However, the many silences that emerged in my study, silences seemingly based on gender, ethnicity, cultural norms, and aesthetic preferences, often pushed me out of my comfort zone. After the class ended, the results of my study weighed on my conscience for several months until I ultimately, for the first time, realized the rationale upon which my pedagogy is psychologically based.

### The Teacher Should Bend But Not Break

If I had to pick metaphors to describe the impact of creative writing pedagogy on myself and my teaching during the study, I would pick metaphors which closely describe the recursive nature of most individual's

writing processes, or how the writing process often defies systematic description of any sort. The term which fits the description well for me is contradictory, sort of like keeping ones' head in "organized chaos," extreme, consistent change, or static flexibility: Keats' term "negative capability" comes to mind, i.e., how a mind can sustain itself in an uncertain situation without rushing for a quick resolution (Holman & Harmon, 1992). By using negative capability in my student assessments, teaching decisions, and teaching plans, I hoped to maintain the intellectual stimulation of each student (as well as of the instructor) and the accommodation of each student's emotional and educational needs.

I believe that I maintain these goals for my students by fostering in them what Loretta Frances Kasper (1998) calls nonjudgmental awareness, an ability to avoid over-criticizing their academic performances while also being "aware of [the] relevant aspects" of those performances. Thus by being flexible in my teaching decisions and assessments, and by giving my students "free reign" for as long as I reasonably can, I can help my students learn more efficiently with a minimum of anxiety, and moreover, if I can help my students learn to write more easily, then each student ultimately will be able, if he or she is silenced, to accomplish Dubois' goal of merging a silenced identity with a mainstream identity into a more healthy self (Dubois, 1997).

From the first day, when we did an ice-breaker to get acquainted with each other, I became acutely aware that I would be required, in order to gain the trust and respect of my students, to express myself and to share

myself more openly in class discussions than I had in my previous classes. After all, how could I realistically ask and expect my students to open themselves enough, to make themselves vulnerable to any buried pain, and to risk feeling it again while they wrote if I, the leader of the class, were too shy to share myself and to lead by example? I had always wanted to perform, to read poems dramatically before my classes, but still after five years of teaching, I had not overcome my shyness by the time this class started. Here I still feel a need, again in Dubois' terms, to merge my eager-to-perform identity and my introverted-identity into a "better and truer self" (1999). But, fortunately, I also found a reason not to judge my students harshly for their shyness!

Student Resistance

I had already known the value of a teacher writing along with his or her students (Chew, 1984), but the heavy paper load of my administrative responsibilities takes the energy out of me often, so I could not have done much about that problem. What I could have done, but have failed to do most often, was to improve my teaching by demonstrating, i.e., performing my subject matter at appropriate times. A rap lyric that I had composed while performing (free-styling) to teach rhythm and beat to a student was at least one such instance where I did this successfully:

Clap your hands,

Keep with the beat,

Snap your fingers

And tap your feet!

I should have tried this more—much more.

One teaching activity that I have always planned, and still have not carried out, is a "rap day." One day I want to come to class dressed in trendy, hip-hop clothing like a rapper, to talk to the class only in rhyme (I think that I could do this—if I could prevent myself from totally losing my composure.), and to have a rapping or "freestyle" contest with the students. However, because of my fears of making a complete fool of myself, I still do not have the guts to try such a project.

Still these entertaining ideas rush through my head along with some guilt. My feelings constantly remind me that using a creative pedagogy not only requires students to write creatively, but it also requires a teacher to ***teach*** creatively. This necessity to innovate, i.e., to improvise continuously, means that the teacher must always be alert to make "heads-up" decisions in the classroom as he or she fields the feedback that the class provides. Like one of Shakespeare's dramatic protagonists (e.g., Hamlet, who upon returning home finds that his throne, his mother, and his father's life have been taken dubiously by an imposter), the teacher must exercise "negative capability" (Holman & Harmon, 1992) in a situation which is unclear (e.g., "Is a silent student engaged in a crucial stage of the creative process or is that student only slacking?") and wait until he or she obtains the most definite evidence possible on which to base the next action.

If the teacher is not alert to what is happening in his or her class, then the results could be catastrophic. As I mentioned in an earlier chapter, when I held my mid-term conferences, I was presented with a major

challenge. During the conferences, most of the student-participants gave short answers to many of my questions, even though the questions that I asked were open-ended. Sometimes a student would give me eye-contact, but not often. Even when I moved the conversation to small talk and got the interviewees to loosen up, they still reverted to short, stock-sounding answers when I tried to gently steer the conversation back to their writing.

By the time I had interviewed about half of my students, I grew frustrated, knowing that the interviews were not going to give me as many revelations as I had hoped to uncover. It was late June, over 100 degrees outside, and most of the students had additional classes, off-campus jobs, and families to worry about besides my writing course. I could tell that they were not very enthusiastic about meeting me for an interview (when they really wanted a day off) or talking about their writing to me. My first impulse was to prolong each conference and keep pressing them to tell me more. But I knew that force was not a part of my teaching style, since my friends have told me that I do not look very intimidating.

Instead, I decided to avoid confronting the students over what appeared to be lethargy and to open the students up by the only means that had worked so far, the writing exercises themselves. My decision appeared to be a good one because a few students later admitted that they were beginning to feel stressed at that halfway point in the semester. Like all researchers, I had to compromise (Mauriello & Pagnucci, 2002).

The summer heat and open curriculum were forcing me to be flexible in other ways too. One student, a male student with a preference for

analytical, expository forms of writing, became very frustrated with the rap assignment and complained angrily to me about his distaste for rap lyrics and rap music. Obviously I did not want to make him write something that he hated, so I just asked him to make only an honest attempt, to "write some junk" in order to learn how the writing experience felt. He took the assignment home and completed it well, writing a rap about, of course, how he hated rap. (He declined to participate in the study; therefore, the poem cannot be printed.)

I was grateful that the female students, whenever they found writing a creative assignment difficult, came to me and simply asked for help.

Types of Silence and Resistance Encountered

Initially, during the first few days of the course, the female students participated readily in the class discussions. They made the class feel, to me, more comfortable by keeping a rapport going. The male students just sat near the rear of the classroom and contributed little. Yet as the semester progressed, the male students contributed more to class discussions and the female students began to withdraw from discussions.

Whenever a male student protested the curriculum, he came to me and vented his frustrations face-to-face; whenever a female student protested, she tended to approach me in a more private and diplomatic way like asking for help. According to Beth Burch (1999), this pattern of gender-behavior is not unusual for students in highly process-oriented writing classes. However, there were occasions when the female students were

publicly uncooperative: as I mentioned earlier, they publicly resisted when we shared our chants and when I lectured about interviewing skills.

When the three females who had refused to share their chants with the class showed me their chants, I learned that each of them had actually prepared the assignment but felt too shy to share their results with the class as a whole. One of the ladies had written about a sensitive subject, being dumped by a lover, and another of the three had written a series of eloquent chants. Since they had written such moving drafts, I let the issue of their resistance go for that day.

My curriculum was designed by me to give the students creative freedom. It appears that the female students, who tended to be more introspective than the male students, used silence itself, i.e. silent, collaborative resistance of my curriculum, as a means to develop their voices and their writing skills. The male students tended to use vocal resistance and confrontation to negotiate their resistance with the instructor.

Because the class noticed that the female students tended to express their resistance in their writing or in non-confrontational, collective actions, the male students began to develop their voices by more social and vocal means. The male students questioned me and their peers more openly in class than the female students did, and the male students tended to contribute to the class discussions more in the middle and later weeks of the semester. In fact, only the male students tended to compete for the class's attention, cracking jokes whenever possible.

My personal silence had social repercussions too. I know that there were times in the class when I felt the necessity to demonstrate an expression or idea. The quality of my instruction could have been enhanced, and I could have gotten the students more intimately engaged in their tasks, yet I often failed to demonstrate because I was too self-conscious to try. I believe that the students picked up on my shyness and felt comfortable that their silence in turn would not be challenged by me, so some degree of silence was actually encouraged by me in the class. However, I did have an active social rapport with every male student in the class. During the class periods we frequently conversed informally, in view and within earshot of the entire class, over the assignments, assignments which the female students tended to discuss with me privately or in a hushed tone of voice. The male students were also more prone to openly ask me about their course grades during the semester.

I did try to compensate for my self-imposed silence by trying to force myself to perform, but often I aborted my performance attempt, resorting in the end to comedy to ease my embarrassment. But in spite of my own difficulties in forcing myself to perform more, perhaps I could have helped my students develop their voices as writers by asking them to perform some short expressive pieces before the class (Harrington, 1998; Alexander, 2000). I could have divided the eight students into two groups and let each group choose a poem to interpret, but the brevity of the eight-week semester, the heaviness of the course workload, and the slow pace that we worked at forced me to cut this interpretive assignment from my curriculum.

Such an exercise might have lessened student silence in my classroom greatly.

I had hoped that by giving the students a wide latitude in expressing themselves that the class would better understand the value of such freedom in not only expressing themselves but also in preserving that freedom for themselves and other people. But the discussion over sports-team names indicates that I will have to use more than the creative-writing exercises themselves to accomplish this goal, if I can accomplish it at all, in one summer semester.

But in spite of some failures, I was relieved to learn that no student wrote or stated that he or she lacked a chance to write or to discuss any desired subject. The students covered such provocative and traumatic violations as being robbed, beaten, and abandoned without showing even the slightest indication of emotional duress: most of the students had already told me or had written that they had thought over carefully what they wanted to share with the class, and that they felt that any mature person should be responsible enough to himself and herself to consider the risks of revealing too much. Six of the eight students were also parents, so this made them more inclined to take responsibility for their actions.

As Teleky (2001) has stated, some of the students were developing their voices by using silence itself as a way of expressing non-consent or conditional consent with the class assignments and schedule. Teleky believes that this use of silence can mark the stage when a student begins to develop his or her voice as a writer. The many times that some of the

female writers declined to follow my explicit instructions are examples of such behavior; the students almost always approached me privately later, to apologize and to renegotiate their status in the class. The students were developing their voices also when, ironically, they asked other students to read their works aloud.

Conclusion

I learned a key principle from dealing with the myriad forms of student silence and student resistance, silences and resistances based on student characteristics of gender, of ethnicity, of race, and of personal background. When these difficulties arise in the classroom, the worst thing that I or a student could do is rush for a quick and convenient remedy of such a problem, a problem which reflects some form of dual-consciousness in the student, a conflict that the student should be allowed to resolve in his or her own manner, which usually requires time.

Because the resolution takes time, the teacher--and the student--must take pains not to take premature actions which could interfere with the student's process of finding his or her voice. The teacher should enter a gray area in his or her decision-making and exercise some form of "negative capability" (Holman & Harmon, 1992), thus giving a resisting student sufficient chances to resolve a consciousness-conflict in writing on his or her own before the teacher attempts more direct means of instruction. Likewise when the student is in that gray area, attempting to resolve a personal silence and to find his or her voice, he or she should exercise non-judgmental awareness and avoid slowing down the process of finding voice


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by being hypercritical of his or her own performance. These approaches that teacher and student should use are almost identical in requiring the participant to stand back, to have faith in the whole-language learning process, and to let matters take care of themselves.

## Final Observations and Conclusions

### Introduction

There is still a strong bias in American academic cultures against the use of creative-writing pedagogies in the composition classroom. The current-traditional paradigm still prevails because for the past century American higher-education has focused upon preparing students primarily for the workplace, where many educators feel that practical writing-skills are sorely needed, and not the flowerly language of belle-lettristic literature. However, over the past forty years, as higher education has attracted more students from historically-marginalized backgrounds, more and more American educators have realized that the traditional paradigm does not meet or ignores the educational needs of those students; thus, in the composition discipline many educators have turned to process-based, multicultural, and expressivistic pedagogies to better include all students in relevant instruction. By providing just one case of a teacher helping each student to develop a unique writing process, to write about topics related to personal culture, and to express a unique self in that writing, my study will provide one small voice, among many more to come, for challenging the advocates of the current paradigm to expand the repertoire of accepted pedagogies in the composition discipline.

While my study was unable to crystallize an exact definition of what creative-writing pedagogy is, I did discover a variety of effects that my use of the pedagogy had upon the students of the class studied, and I discovered a plethora of effects that my use of the pedagogy had upon me.

Ultimately I discovered how some students begin to emerge from silence and to develop their voices as writers when introduced to a creative writing pedagogy. The dramatic and intense egregiousness of several key events, like the collective silences of the formal interviews, the teacher-student conferences, and the class sharing-sessions, silences which contrasted strongly with the thick descriptions of the participants' written samples, make my study a good, clear-cut example of the effects of a teacher using creative-writing pedagogy in a composition class. The large volume and variety of eloquent works which were attempted and written enthusiastically by the participants in such a short and stressful time (an eight-week, not sixteen-week, three-semester-hour course) meant that the pedagogy was, I believe, more effective in motivating students to write than teaching only expository writing.

In the end I learned the specific manner in which I want to use creative writing pedagogy in my future classes. I learned what genres with which to start a class and how much leeway to give the students. More importantly, I have a more acute understanding of when and when not to give my students leeway and why I should or should not give that leeway. Most importantly, I learned better how to use what my students produce to make better writers of them and of myself.

What Is Creative-Writing Pedagogy?

After conducting this teacher research project, I still feel on firmer ground if I define creative-writing pedagogy, or even creativity itself, by stating what it is not rather than by affirming what it is. I feel this way

because the method by which a person evaluates any creative work is dependent upon that person's subjective values (both personal and cultural) and unique experiences, so no two persons evaluate a single work in the same way: therefore, experts within almost any discipline can fail to reach a consensus in their evaluations of a controversial work (Sarbo & Moxley, 1994).

Because of this evaluative difficulty, and because the nature of creativity is in some ways too complex to define, I would like to amend the definition of Turkle, Bair, Barnett, Pierce, and West (1994) to describe creative-writing pedagogy as the teaching of writing as a process of self-discovery and self-expression, a process which explores and expresses that writer's self in ways that other modes of writing (i.e., description, exposition, argumentation) *do not* express: one of the key ways in which creative writing differs from the other modes, as my student Naomi suggested and as Tom Romano (2000, 1995) asserts, is that creative writing allows a writer to ignore concerns for audience and write solely as a means of thinking.

Although this definition lacks the clarity I had initially sought, my research, as Sarbo and Moxley (1994) had predicted for me, has given me some procedural guideposts to help me better foster creative writing for my students within the context of my own composition classroom. Those guideposts center about the issues of how intensely the teacher coaches students in adapting their expressive skills to academic discourse, of how

innovatively the teacher executes curriculum plans, and of how nonchalantly the teacher makes allowance for student silence in the classroom.

How Well Can First-Year Students Learn to Adapt Creative-Writing Techniques to Composition Assignments?

I have spotted one major obstacle to executing my pedagogy in the first-year composition course: most students can apply the writing techniques that they learn from the creative-writing exercises to their story-writing skills, but many of the students need additional help in transferring those creative skills to the genres of expository, argumentative, and research writing. In almost every case the quality of students' writing declined when the class studied wrote in these more traditional academic genres. The outlines and prewritings of the participants indicate that the students did develop their communicative competences well enough to understand the process of writing academic arguments and research papers. Therefore, with more practice I am confident that the students will continue to develop their performance skills for these genres.

I cannot determine the exact cause of this decline: recent research by Foertsch (1995) indicates that first-year students, all having completed less than one year of study, should be allowed an extra year to acclimate themselves to the academic culture before being expected to master fully written academic discourse. Recent research by Lee Ann Carol (2002) indicates that this period of building communicate competence and communicative performance may last until a student's ***junior or early***

***senior years*** if the student has to master a heavy amount of content knowledge. Therefore, I believe that a teacher using creative-writing pedagogy should use more direct methods of instruction to help the students continue expressing themselves well in the class writings. The instructor in this phase of instruction should oversee, in class, how his or her students write at each stage of their writing process, whether the stage is pre-writing, drafting, revising, or editing. The instructor can provide numerous examples of reflective essays and position papers to teach the integration of narrative within exposition and argumentation. The instructor can also provide examples of essays written on both the professional and the student levels of expertise. Finally, the instructor can demonstrate how he or she develops such an essay using narrative to support or illustrate the main points. This last method, according to Charles Chew (1984) is perhaps the best one because the students are allowed to see the generation of an actual piece of writing.

I now realize that my students' performance on the academic writings was not unusual. Their argumentative papers and research papers may have lacked some organization and systematic covering of subtopics, but the students did develop the points that they covered well. Therefore, I will borrow the advice of Noskin (2000) and give more exercises focusing on organization, only after I return the graded papers to the class. I wish to give the exercises at such a time in order to avoid inhibiting the students' creativity, which can happen when teachers give students very-structured brainstorming exercises like canned "think sheets" before final drafts are

completed (Noskin). Such exercises can restrict students' thinking because the instructions may be worded too specifically, which could narrow the number of possibilities that the students consider. I plan to allow my students more opportunities to revise their papers for the portfolio due the final week of the semester.

My study definitely confirmed for me that first-year students can learn to draft verse successfully: it seems that the creative genres are based upon our natural-language skills more strongly than the academic genres. The creative-writing pedagogy which I had been using since 1998, a method of mostly teaching the syllabics of various verse forms, enabled students to express themselves easily in the poetic genre of their choosing. In my future classes, I will start the poetic instruction by introducing the ancient chant form, because it is based on the beats and rhythms of the music of our cultures, and because music is a key part of many of my students' lives (Goebel 2002; Thomas, 1998). Then I shall introduce other chants, chants such as the rap music which is so popular today. Next I will move to free verse, that free verse which is written to a beat, before I cover more traditional meters like the ballad and the blues stanza.

The Instructor Should Take a Multifaceted and Variable Role in Teaching the Class: He or She Should Teach *Creatively*

I have concluded that the teacher who uses creative-writing pedagogy in the composition classroom needs to be a role model who leads by example and not "in the rear," i.e., watching his or her students take risks that he or she would never dare take. Such a teacher should coach, even

entertain, his or her students into feeling that they can write as their imaginations dictate. The students need, by the instructor's guidance, the feeling of security that a creative failure is not a thing to fear: it is only one of hundreds of risks a writer (or any creative artist) should take to improve his or her craft (Nicoliades, 1941; Meeks, 1999). Therefore, a teacher has an advantage in employing this pedagogy if he has an extroverted personality.

The teacher should also realize that because he or she and the students are all human beings with unique sets of preferences and experiences, that each participant brings unique expectations and skills to the writing tasks, and that therefore each participant will create unique results. Therefore it is impractical for an instructor to expect a standard result from all of his or her students. And if each student may create a unique result, then each student may use a unique means to create that result.

Politically the teacher should adopt an ad exemplum, almost anarchical methodology, one which respects the ideosyncracies of his of her students (Irmscher, 1994). However, I have decided that whenever my first-year writings classes receive sufficient practice in writing creatively (very expressively), which many of the students develop a quick facility with, I should then give them a graduated approach to writing in the traditional academic genres, i.e., exposition and argumentation. The first step in my approach would be to increase the amount of modeling (Chew, 1987) that I do in the classroom. I plan to increase the amount of modeling by writing

with the students more often: for each academic genre that the class covers, I shall, on a class-by-class basis, demonstrate each step of progress of my own writing-process, so that my students can receive a realistic example of how one writer approaches his work. My examples would provide a framework, or what Lev Vygotsky called a "zone of proximal development" to guide the weaker writers of my class in developing their writing processes (Vygotsky & Luria, 1993, p. 18).

I plan to supplement this modeling-type of instruction with more direct, one-on-one, individualistic instruction to give weaker students needed support and to insure that my approach, based on what Tom Fox (1983) calls a shaping theory, begins to have the effect of a pedagogy based on a growing theory, which would cultivate each student's individual talents. I would want the cultivational effect because an approach based purely on a shaping-type pedagogical theory might coax or coerce the students to imitate the teacher and abandon developing their own voices (Fox). I have discovered that each student's writing ability (for each particular assignment) has a close relation to the extent of imitation and innovation (relative to the professional samples read, student-written examples read, and the works of his or her classmates) in his or her drafts, so I can assess each student without interrupting him or her in the writing process.

<u>The Teacher Should Encourage Students to Write Very Creatively: They Should Compose Works in a Variety of Genres</u>

One specific part of my creative teaching approach is that I would like to demonstrate to the students how I myself adapted (and how they can

adapt their abilities) my ability to write expressively into writing exposition and argumentation. I would show the students how to adapt by demonstrating to them how to write in genres which have similarities to both expressive and to traditionally academic writing. The first genre might be the reflective paper. The reason I would choose the reflective paper is that it resembles the magazine or newspaper editorial, an article in which a writer may use a story as illustration or an example to argue a point.

After the peer-review(s) and the writing of the final drafts, I would repeat the process with a more methodical and structured type of discourse, a position paper which examines an issue from a wider range of viewpoints than an editorial does. I would explain and demonstrate to the students, by writing such a position paper, how to use their storytelling techniques to create convincing illustrations and hypothetical arguments. Because the writing would become even more analytical, I would have to coach my students to a greater extent.

Event though the students would be writing more analytic assignments, I would not ask them to abandon their creative writing. The class would still practice some creative writing in order that those expressive-skills that they had developed at the beginning of the semester did not atrophy when the focus moves to expository and academic prose. The continuance of creative assignments would also help those students who have difficulty with academic prose to keep their morale high, helping them to develop their language-performance skills more smoothly (Romano, 1995).

The prolific results produced by Tessa, the poems decorated by line-drawings, printed icons, and elaborate fonts, provide a key rationale explaining why a teacher should urge his or her students to write both expressively and analytically from the beginning to the end of the course. Tessa composed many of her pieces in multiple genres, genres which enabled her to express herself more fully than poetic discourse alone would. Sirpa T. Grierson (1999) claims that this use of multiple genres produces "self-contained pieces [of discourse] called *crots* that appear ...[as] poetry, prose, drama, exposition" or any other media that engages the senses. Furthermore each crot makes "a point of its own, separated from other text by white space, unconnected...by transitional devices" (quoted in Grierson, 1999, p. 51). Therefore, the use of multiple media in writing helps both the writer and reader understand matters from different viewpoints more accurately (Grierson, 1999; Dissertation Consortium, 2001; Romano, 1995).

Consequently, each student who writes a piece in multiple genres should find his or her own crots (or points) easy to organize, as easy as organizing the nexuses of his or her own cluster (webbing). I will attempt to persuade my students to write in multiple genres more by revising my assignment handouts to include more genres. Likewise I will use in my classes more professional examples written in multiple genres. This technique should improve the engagement of my students as dramatically as some teachers of classic English literature have done for students steeped in pop culture (Moore, 2002). In the end I hope to improve my students' confidence to the extent that they look at each genre not as a set of rules to

obey but as forms that can be manipulated to create any desired effect (Dean, 2000).

We Can Learn to Understand (or Conquer) Silence Only by First Surrendering to It

I have learned that silence is not a phenomenon which is thrust solely on single students or any group of disenfranchised minority students. Silence can be used by any individual as a means of developing a voice and as a means of protest. Silence can also be a cultural value, a value that seemed to be shared by most of the Hispanic students in my class. The stature and respect that many Hispanic cultures place upon teachers was a factor that contributed to the silence of the participants during my research interviews; therefore, I will be less disturbed by this behavior when I encounter it again in my classroom teaching. Above all, I have learned to adopt my attitudes of "negative capability" and of not being judgmental in order to give a silent student the best possible chance of finding his or her voice.

It is safe to say, on the basis of this study and prior studies (Ray, 2000), that there are differences between the sexes in terms of students' responses to creative-writing pedagogy. The female students, who on average wrote more often than the male students, were prone to use the course as a means to explore personal, relationship-based, or spiritual problems, problems which demanded coping before improvement as writers could be developed. The female students were more prone to work on their own schedules and demand individual instruction from the teacher

researcher; when they did work in groups, the female students tended to prefer gender-homogenous groups.

The male students also tended to enjoy working in gender-homogeneous groups, and they used the group activities for different purposes than the female students. The female students often shared stories of personal crisis, seeking, in addition to feedback about the writing, validation and support from the group. The male students sought validation from their group too, but they told stories that alleged (or boasted) their physical dominance or cunning. The male students also attempted humor and entertaining their male peers more than the female students attempted entertaining their peers.

One means of working out these differences and getting the students to work together is by requiring the students to perform collaboratively some of the pieces that they write or read (Harrington, 1998; Alexander, 2000). Some students who feel uncomfortable sharing writing about themselves have fewer problems assuming a persona to interpret another writer's thoughts and feelings. I lacked the time to use this approach in my study, but I have used this collaborative method before with general success, so I plan to include more use of it in my future classes. Even the teacher asking students to each read a classmates' work aloud might help.

The feedback that I received when the class discussed the Estrada essay changed my outlook on the silencing of students. There exists a great rift in opinion between many Amer-Indian peoples and their leaders over the issue of the sports symbology of American Indians, but I had thought that

each of my students, as I had done with my silencing, might relate their silencing to the issue and agree with Estrada. Since I now realize that my students and many others disagree, I see that I will have to seek out other means to raise my students' consciousness that the stereotyping of other peoples is actually a silencing of those others, a silencing that affects not only the named victims but also many others. I will also have to examine carefully the issue of how much introducing a class topic imposes my values on my students and where I should draw the line in asking a class to examine such issues.

I will definitely have to change my means of teaching academic prose: by resorting more to the measure of writing along with the class (Chew), I hope to improve the performance of my classes on the argumentative and research papers. Because my students wrote the academic discourse like they lacked experience, I myself wish to document more accurately how I learn to write new genres, so that I may better learn how to guide my students in acclimating themselves to academic discourse (Dethier, 2002). By improving the students' performance, I hope to also curb or prevent the silencing effect that the learning of these types of discourse can cause on freshman and sophomore students.

What I Learned About Doing Research

I have learned from this research that I have to prepare a backup research strategy if I intend to gather data by the means of formal interviews or formal conversations. My teaching style is highly informal and lends itself easily to informal conversations, not scheduled, high-context,

formal ones; therefore, structured interviews are alien to this sort of teaching environment. My friends tell me that I am not an intimidating figure, so I feel sure that none of the students feared me—it had to be that the formal environment of the interviews made the participants feel uncomfortable, in effect silencing them. However, the journals, stories, essays, and even the questionnaires revealed the participants' thoughts much more than I had anticipated. The intense, written involvement of the female participants in this study leads me to look for more expressive, written evidence in my future research.

Lisa McClure, a writing-program coordinator at the University of Illinois-Carbondale, has claimed to me that when she wrote her dissertation, it belonged to her committee more than to her when she finished it (McClure, 2002; Dissertation Consortium, 2001). I had had strong premonitions about writing a series of well-organized narratives about my research, but I had revised my plan several times during the writing of the proposal to suit my advisor's knowledge, a few times to pass the members of IUP's and Western's review boards, and many times to meet the final approval of my dissertation committee. The subsequent revisions looked less like my original plan, but I eventually realized that even though I was the only researcher gathering and analyzing data for the study, I was not, in a sense, carrying out this research alone, so I had a high probability of being guided into a relevant territory to research. Finally, the changes that the study and its environment imposed upon the design of my research further

complicated my efforts, yet made me grateful that I had the guidance to help me steer a steady course through the storm.

In addition to learning how complicated the process of research is and learning the value to that process of gaining feedback from as many expert voices as possible, I learned that the research process is less like a single method and more like a way of life. Since I started teaching creative writing in my composition classes in 1998, I have kept a journal, a journal now filled with dozens of personal revelations, compromises, and innovations made not while in the solitude of my office but while in the process of teaching writing in the classroom. Today I do not feel comfortable teaching if I do not take the time to record, after each class, the events that I observe in that class and the subsequent plans that I form for that class. As Heichel and Miller (1993) assert, I feel that teacher research, or reflective practice, has become an integral and necessary part of how I teach.

What I Learned About Teaching

Naomi's comment about creative writing requiring creative thinking from the student reverberated in my mind. If creative thinking is required from the student, then likewise creative thinking must be required from the instructor who has chosen to implement a creative pedagogy. But how does an instructor teach creatively?

I had learned over the past four years the necessity to tailor my lesson plans constantly to meet the needs of the classroom-situation or class-context, a context-specific strategy (Kilwein-Guevara, 1997) which met my needs well but flew in the face of the prescriptive strategies that most of my

colleagues used to teach writing. In light of the rigid academic culture that I worked in, I sometimes felt like I was forced to "wing it" whenever my students had failed to understand my plans or failed to prepare sufficiently for my classes. However, this apparent lack of organization, or "chaos" in pedagogy, mirrors the apparent chaos of the writing process, which is recursive, so that this pedagogy actually helps students learn in their natural manner, which is a global (synthetic) one: "all phases of [the writing process] occur simultaneously with significant overlap....We must not force that process into a linear model that restrains [student writers]" (Thomas, 2000, p. 39). Each student is allowed to learn prescribed genres by integrating them with her or his own style of writing, which allows the student to write about real-life concerns without sacrificing that content to the arbitrary rules of a genre (Thomas).

More importantly, the pedagogy helps each student, by immersing him or her in that apparently random process, to "mitigate [his or her] internal conflicts [which ***do not*** appear random to him or her]" which can propel him or her to write (Harris, 2001). The reason why the process does not feel random to the student is that he or she writes about concerns and events which are rooted in life-experiences, so each one of those concerns and events each has an emotionally-charged value to the student. The student cannot fail to be stimulated by personal past history.

However, this study made me realize that there was some consistency to teaching writing in this creative manner. The creative pedagogy required me to accommodate each student as much as possible, but the pedagogy

required me also to develop a rapport with each student, a rapport in which we were able to negotiate the curriculum and cultivate that student's interests and skills as a writer. This rapport reminds me strongly of the dialogics in instruction that Paulo Freire (1973), Mark Hurlbert (1996), and Blitz and Hurlbert (1998) have advocated.

Every day in class, from the beginning, when the students were preparing to discuss or to share their assignments, until the end, when at least one student would stay after class to discuss his or her work, I would hold an informal and individual conversation with each student. We would usually talk about his or her work-in-progress (or a future assignment): the student would either ask me to evaluate it or ask me for permission to complete the assignment in a manner more personally relevant to him or to her.

During each conversation, as I listened to each student voice specific concerns, I would try casually to assuage any student fears, offer encouragement, and offer the student options for completing the assignment under question. I would offer options to the student as a means of opening the terms of the curriculum to negotiation. The offers that I made to negotiate were most effective and accepted usually after the student and I had talked about his or her personal interests, which created some sort of basis for reconciliation and consensus. I often had to negotiate an assignment with each student in this manner.

<u>What Do I Want to Research Next?</u>

After discovering the key needs to implementing a creative-writing pedagogy, specifically a teacher's needs to start with freer verse-forms, to teach creatively, to coach multi-genre work, to be nonjudgmental, to seek feedback, and to teach to suit the demands of the situation, I would like to examine further how these factors influence my composition classrooms by conducting a series of selectively-sampled case studies on student-volunteers from those classrooms. I wish to create more fully-developed writer-portraits than those of my study, portraits that include not only each writer's personal background and history, but also factors like how each writer's problem-solving habits and personality traits affect that writer's writing performance. I wish to follow in detail how an instructor using a creative-writing pedagogy in a composition classroom negotiates the curriculum with each member of a sexually, culturally, racially, and *psychologically* (Sarbo & Moxley, 1994, p. 137-139) wide variety of writing students. In the end, I hope to arrive at a set of conclusions that I may apply widely to at least my own composition classrooms, i.e., how I may better recognize the types of writers and the behaviors associated with those types, and how I may better structure my class and adapt my teaching to accommodate those varied student types (Sarbo & Moxley).

One issue that has intrigued me is that of determining, if possible, if any sort of general sequence of exercises could be recommended to the composition teacher using creative-writing pedagogy in her or his classroom. Since 1998, I have used exercises that I devised in various versions and sequences, versions and sequences dictated to me by the circumstances of

each class. Because I have always taught a large number of composition sections per semester, I, like Fred Barton (2002) have always worried about teaching writing in a fashion too mechanical or artificial to cultivate my students' creativity.

I have read educational studies which claimed to improve the writing of students by training them in canned writing strategies (e.g., Albertson & Billingsley, 2001), but these studies measured student writing improvement in dubious terms such as the time spent writing and the number of words written, and the studies measured groups of students who were highly familiar with standard-written English, so there was little ethnic, racial, and linguistic diversity amongst the groups. Also, the students may have been conscious of researcher manipulation of the writing curriculum, which I felt perhaps biased these studies too heavily.

Therefore, I would like to attempt more teacher-research on the effect of a specific sequence of creative-writing exercises in another composition class. The exercises would be ordered in the sequence progressively by their degree of structure, i.e., the genres with the fewest requirements before the genres with the most. I would probably start the study with exercises in prose, prose poems, free verse, and then chants before I would get to the more metrical forms used in popular songs. Besides aiming to avoid stultifying the students' creativity, I would aim to create a situation where I would not be thrusting highly-structured exercises upon my students: no, I would want the students, realizing the power that

knowledge and mastery of the structures brings to their expression, to ask me to provide it for them if needed (Barton, 2002).

The results of such a series of studies on curriculum design might give creative-writing and composition teachers more insight, I hope, on why a highly-creative, ad-exemplum methodology of teaching seems to be required. I believe that the apparent randomness (or recursiveness) of the writing process corresponds highly to the way the human brain processes sensory, and more importantly, memory experiences, so a curriculum that avoids dictating a pattern my be most effective to teaching students to write creatively.

Conclusion

My teacher-research and my review of the creative-writing literature has led me to conclude that creative writing pedagogy, which is very much in need on American campuses, has its greatest futures in conjunction with the growth and expanse of two fields which interest me most, cultural studies and our exponentially-growing cyber-technologies and cyber-cultures. Therefore, I feel that creative-writing pedagogy will be here to stay for a long time, whether composition traditionalists accept it or not. However, because the pedagogy has never been widely adopted by American academics, many arguments remain to be won by creative-writing teachers to gain that widespread acceptance and to pave crucial inroads and cross-ties with other disciplines, which would consolidate the pedagogy's place in the academy. The debates remaining may be many, but the discipline can give silenced students new opportunities, just as multicultural

studies have done for past generations. It can open and lift student voices. This teacher research, one of few studies which studied the use of creative writing pedagogy in class composed of a unique, cross-cultural mixture of racial minorities and non-traditional students, is one of many such voices, and indicative of countless more choirs to come:

> That music always round me, unceasing, unbeginning—yet long untaught I did not hear;
>
> But now the chorus I hear, and am elated,
>
> . . . . . .
>
> I listen to the different voices winding in and out, striving . . . .
>
> I do not think the performers know themselves—but now I think I begin to know them.
>
> (Whitman, 1999)

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